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Jesus Christ as Poetic Symbol: Wilhelm Bousset's Contribution to the Faith-History Debate

Brent A. R. Hege*

"Poetry is nearer to vital truth than history." Plato, *Ion*

"Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history;

for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." Aristotle, *The Poetics*

Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920)¹ is perhaps best remembered as a New Testament scholar in the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, particularly for his seminal work on early Christology, *Kyrios Christos*, first published in 1913.² Appraisals of Bousset's work in English typically limit their view to this work, paying little or no attention to the theological presuppositions and development of his thought. Those scholars who do review Bousset's work with an eye toward his theological interests tend to paint him broadly as a classic liberal whose interests in the historical Jesus of Nazareth are best understood as a misguided attempt to provide a firm and secure foundation for faith by means of historical-critical research.³ However, a longer view of Bousset's work over the course of his career suggests that his approach to history, particularly with respect to the possibility of securing faith's foundation in the historical Jesus, underwent significant development and can be divided into two periods: the early period of his work on Jesus, in which he remains more or less faithful to the classic liberal approach to the historical Jesus, and the

* I would like to thank Dirk von der Horst of Claremont Graduate University and Drs. Dawn DeVries and Andreas Schuele of Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education for their comments on a draft of this article.

¹ For the most comprehensive study of Bousset's life and career, see Anthonie F. Verheule, *Wilhelm Bousset, Leben und Werk. Eine theologiegeschichtlicher Versuch*. Amsterdam: Van Bottenburg, 1973.

² Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos. Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus*, 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965. English translation: *Kyrios Christos. A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely. Nashville: Abingdon, 1970.

³ Larry Hurtado, for example, remarks that Bousset's religious convictions are of a "now quaint, Old Liberal bent." Larry Hurtado, "New Testament Christology: A Critique of Bousset's Influence." *TS* 40 (1979): 306–317, p. 307. Similarly, Hendrikus Boers detects an insoluble Christological dilemma in Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* but notes that Bousset was untroubled by it because "as a 19th-century liberal he found security in what he believed to have been the simple teaching of Jesus, of which the NT Christology was a mere burdening and complication." Hendrikus Boers, "Jesus and the Christian Faith: New Testament Christology since Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*." *JBL* 89 (1970): 450–456, 452.

period, beginning in 1909, of his friendship with Leonard Nelson and Rudolf Otto, two leading proponents of Neo-Friesianism. It is this introduction to the work of Jakob Friedrich Fries that marks a profound shift in Bousset's thinking on the historical Jesus and on the relationship between faith and history, and it is his flight from history toward a Friesian rationalism that provides the theological and philosophical foundation for Bousset's most intriguing and significant contributions to the faith-history debate.

In his early work on Jesus Bousset remained faithful to the classic liberal approach in which the gospels are scoured for accurate historical details of the life, ministry, and teaching of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. These historical "kernels," lying just beneath the gilded façade of the evangelists' portraits of Jesus Christ, serve as the essential elements for a biography of Jesus that can serve as a pattern and example for Christian faith and ethics in the modern world. As many commentators – chief among them Albert Schweitzer – have observed, the resulting portrait of Jesus almost inevitably reflects thoroughly modern sensibilities and agendas.⁴ Modern ethical and religious predilections find support in the life and words of Jesus, who is regarded as a figure of unparalleled moral heroism and ethical courage. To borrow George Tyrrell's famous criticism of Adolf von Harnack, nineteenth-century liberal biographers of Jesus tended to see in Jesus "only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well."⁵

In his first book on Jesus, *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum*,⁶ Bousset discovers a Jesus quite at home in contemporary Protestant liberalism. But more important than the results of his research presented here are his reflections on the ability of historical-critical research to provide a firm and secure foundation for faith. In a lengthy footnote on Martin Kähler's reluctance to grant historical criticism an unrestricted claim to establish such a foundation, Bousset presents a passionate defense of the historical-critical method. While Kähler is certainly justified when he doubts the ability of historical research to prove that in Jesus Christ we have the full revelation of God, Bousset believes that his own historical method – that of the *religionsgeschichtliche* school – withstands Kähler's criticisms by focusing, not on historical details, but on the broad contours of the personality of Jesus. And while historical criticism can never provide the judgment of faith itself, that in Jesus Christ we have the full revelation of God, it can

⁴ "It was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus." Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus. A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery, 2nd ed. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911, 4.

⁵ George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*. London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1910, 44.

⁶ Wilhelm Bousset, *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum. Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Vergleich*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892.

and must provide that judgment with its "necessary support."⁷ Bousset concludes his study by affirming a general picture of the historical personality of Jesus that is sufficient for faith, specifically a Jesus who is world-affirming and utterly divorced from the Judaism of his time.⁸ Despite Bousset's intentions to have secured a foundation for faith by means of a rigorously prosecuted *religionsgeschichtliche* method, Albert Schweitzer criticizes the book as being "not historical, but supra-historical. [...] Bousset vindicates Jesus, not for history, but for Protestantism."⁹

Already by 1904 there are indications that Bousset is beginning to lose confidence in the ability of historical-critical research to provide a secure foundation for faith.¹⁰ In his popular book, *Jesus*,¹¹ many of the same themes are sounded as in *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum*, including a strong moral and ethical emphasis and a disregard for miracles and the supernatural elements of the gospel narratives. However, there are two important developments that occurred in the meantime that shed light on Bousset's evolving appraisal of the value of historical research for faith.¹² First, while in his first book Bousset attributed any eschatological element in Jesus' preaching to the dogmatic interests of the early community, in *Jesus* he is willing to concede (no doubt under Schweitzer's influence) that the eschatological elements are authentic expressions of Jesus' worldview and that Jesus was a failed eschatological prophet.¹³ Second, and more important for our purposes here, this book reveals a growing reluctance on Bousset's part to trust historical research to provide a firm and secure foundation for faith. He has not yet made his decisive break with history, but he is no longer the unequivocal historical optimist he was in the beginning of his career. He now

⁷ Ibid., 8, n. 1.

⁸ Ibid., 64–65.

⁹ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1911), 249.

¹⁰ Anthonie Verheule makes a similar observation: "One sees in [Bousset's] development a growing skepticism regarding the possibility of a somewhat secure historical knowledge of Jesus, and his skepticism grew more profound the more he sought a rational, unhistorical foundation for his faith." Verheule, *Wilhelm Bousset*, 380.

¹¹ Wilhelm Bousset, *Jesus*, 3rd ed., Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher für die deutsche christliche Gegenwart 1. Reihe, 2./3. Heft. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1907. English translation: *Jesus*, trans. Janet Penrose Trevelyan and ed. W. D. Morrison, Crown Theological Library 14. New York: G. Putnam, 1906.

¹² Robert Strimple also detects a shift in Bousset's basic assumptions in this period, noting that *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum* remains a classic liberal presentation of the life of Jesus while Bousset's second and third books on Jesus – *Jesus* and *Was Wissen Wir von Jesus?* Halle a. S.: Gebauer-Schwetschke, 1904 – reveal a movement toward what Strimple calls "radicalism." This is especially the case in terms of Bousset's willingness to acknowledge the genuinely eschatological elements in Jesus' preaching and the heavy hand of the early Christian community in the gospel narratives. Robert Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus. An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospels Criticism*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995, 71–72.

¹³ Bousset, *Jesus*, 96. Citations are to the English translation.

recognizes that the gospel narratives provide very little reliable historical information:

We are no longer in a position to reconstruct an historical picture of the ministry of Jesus in Galilee according to its chronological development, for the narrative of our Gospels, with its prevailing timelessness and its frequent arrangement of the words and deeds of Jesus in a designedly material order, does not provide the means necessary for such a picture. Only a few scanty data can be established with certainty.¹⁴

The scarcity of reliable data about the historical Jesus makes any biography of him, in the modern understanding of that genre, impossible; however, historical research is still capable of determining the broad contours of the personality of Jesus and the resultant portrait of Jesus is sufficient for a vivid picture of his ministry and its significance.¹⁵ What emerges is a thoroughly modern Jesus of ethical strength and moral heroism, committed to the value of this world and of the human spirit, a man whose “whole intercourse with God lies in the realm of the spiritual and personal. Nowhere is any value attached to outward means and forms.”¹⁶

Despite what looks very much like a classic liberal portrait of the historical Jesus, there are indications in this presentation of a subtle shift away from an uncritical acceptance of history’s demonstrative power. Most significant is Bousset’s tendency in *Jesus* to include reflections on the distinction between historical “husks” and eternal “kernels.” For example, in the first chapter on the birth narratives in the synoptic gospels, Bousset distinguishes between the clearly legendary accounts of Jesus’ birth and the eternal meaning embedded and transmitted in and through these accounts:

The mystery of the person of Jesus does not lie in the manner of its outward origin. Nor will the first chapters of Luke, with their wonderful poetic beauty, ever cease to be full of meaning and value for us, even though we regard them as pure legend. They bear within themselves their value for all time. They are the glittering halo which the poetic faith of the first community set upon the head of Jesus. The forms of that faith are transitory, but the faith itself in its inmost essence still remains.¹⁷

Elsewhere, concurring with Schweitzer’s appraisal of Jesus as a failed eschatological prophet, Bousset cautions against throwing away the eternally valid content of Jesus’ mistaken predictions of an imminent end to the world, noting that the form of Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God was transitory but nevertheless contained an eternal content whose “husk had already shed itself.”¹⁸

What has prompted these subtle but important shifts in Bousset’s thinking on the nature of history and its ability to serve as the foundation for faith?

¹⁴ Ibid., 11–12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19–20.

¹⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4–5.

¹⁸ Ibid., 96–97.

There are several factors, but one that deserves special attention is the influence of Thomas Carlyle on Bousset's appreciation of the relationship between history and eternity, particularly in terms of Christology.¹⁹

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881)²⁰ was a Scottish philosopher, historian, and political and social commentator who was widely read and discussed across the Anglo-Saxon world in the nineteenth century. Bousset had read some of his works quite early in his career, even using a passage from Carlyle's philosophical novel, *Sartor Resartus* (1833–1834), as the epigraph to *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum*.²¹ But it is only in *Jesus* that one begins to detect Carlyle's influence, particularly of what has been called Carlyle's "philosophy of clothes," expounded in *Sartor Resartus* ("The Tailor Re-Tailored").²²

Carlyle's novel is the account of an English editor's work on a treatise entitled "Clothes: Their Origin and Influence," by the fictitious German transcendental philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. In it Carlyle utilizes the perspective of the editor and passages from the fictional philosophical treatise to present his philosophy of clothes, a system of thought that considers all historical phenomena as finite wrappings or "clothes" for eternal ideas. The "clothes" that appear within finite history serve as images or seals of eternal ideas, to mediate what is pure spirit through the senses to reason; true wisdom, Carlyle suggests, consists in looking upon the clothes "till they become *transparent*," that is, until one is capable of grasping the eternal idea that is mediated through them.²³ Most significant for Bousset's theological development, however, is Carlyle's description of clothes as symbols: "In the symbol proper, what we can call a Symbol, there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there."²⁴ Any mundane object, including historical figures, can serve as a symbol of the infinite. In the passage cited by Bousset as the epigraph to *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum*, Carlyle lifts up the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the most potent and most divine symbol in

¹⁹ The influence of Carlyle has already been noted by others, including Klaus Berger, who suggests that Bousset took Carlyle's approach to historic personalities as the point of departure for his Christology. Klaus Berger, "Wilhelm Bousset, Thomas Carlyle und Jakob Friedrich Fries." In *Exegese und Philosophie*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 123/124. Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1986, 111.

²⁰ For a recent intellectual biography of Carlyle, see John Morrow, *Thomas Carlyle*. London and New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006.

²¹ The epigraph notwithstanding, *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum* bears few signs of any significant influence of Carlyle, despite Albert Schweitzer's suggestion that the book is "inspired by the spirit of Carlyle." Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1911), 249.

²² Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Archibald MacMecham. Boston: The Athenaeum Press, 1896.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

human history, "a Symbol of quite perennial, infinite character; whose significance will ever demand to be anew inquired into, and anew made manifest."²⁵

A later work of Carlyle's, a series of lectures on heroism and hero-worship in history published in 1841,²⁶ also played a significant role in the development of Bousset's estimation of history and the role of historic personalities. In these lectures Carlyle treats history as both the stage and the product of "great men" – divine figures, prophets, poets, priests, men of letters, and kings – who embody eternal truth and reality in their person and manifest to the world ideals of creative, enduring value. The hero dwells in the realm of the eternal and the divine under the guise of the temporal and the trivial, appearing on the world stage "as lightning out of Heaven; the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame."²⁷ By contemplating these historic personalities one may gain a glimpse into "the very marrow of world history."²⁸ Carlyle's philosophy of history is quite simply the philosophy of hero-worship, a veneration of the "great men" who have created and shaped universal history.²⁹

That Carlyle's work made a lasting impression on Bousset is clear not only from the epigraph to *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum*, but also from an article on Carlyle (whom he calls "a prophet of the nineteenth century") published in *Die Christliche Welt* in 1897.³⁰ In a burst of effusive praise, Bousset cites Carlyle's influence among the spiritual and intellectual leaders of contemporary Germany as "one of the most joyful and hopeful events in the spiritual life of our people [...] leading our people, in spite of all their trials and tribulations, upward and not downward, forward and not backward."³¹ Nevertheless, Carlyle's philosophy of clothes and his definition of history as the arena of heroic personalities lacked a sufficiently comprehensive philosophical foundation to support a wholesale reorientation of Bousset's thinking on history. That philosophical foundation was soon provided, however, by the work of the Kantian Jakob Friedrich Fries.

Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773–1843)³² began his academic career as a theological student at the Moravian academy in Niesky but quickly aban-

²⁵ Ibid., 203.

²⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. Archibald MacMecham. Boston: The Athenaeum Press, 1901.

²⁷ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 88.

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹ Klaus Berger notes that Bousset's enthusiasm for Carlyle's "hero worship" is now considered objectionable, particularly in light of the cult of the *Führer* that developed in Germany in the 1930s. Berger, "Wilhelm Bousset, Thomas Carlyle und Jakob Friedrich Fries," 109.

³⁰ Wilhelm Bousset, "Thomas Carlyle: Ein Prophet des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts." *ChW* 11 (1897): 249–253, 267–271, 296–299, 324–327.

³¹ Bousset, "Thomas Carlyle," 249–251.

³² One of the few comprehensive studies of Fries is the dissertation of Bousset's colleague at Göttingen, Leonard Nelson, published as *Jakob Friedrich Fries und seine jüngsten Kritiker*

doned theology for philosophy. After studying at Leipzig and Jena he was called to Heidelberg as professor of philosophy and mathematics and later moved to Jena to teach philosophy, physics, and mathematics. Among his more influential works are *System der Philosophie als evidente Wissenschaft* (1804), *Neue Kritik der Vernunft* (1807), which appeared in its second edition as *Neue oder anthropologische Kritik der Vernunft* (1828–1831) and most significant for our purposes here, *Wissen, Glaube und Ahndung* (1805),³³ a work that made a profound impression on Bousset and his colleague at Göttingen, Rudolf Otto.³⁴

Wissen, Glaube und Ahndung represents Fries's attempt to move the Kantian critical philosophy in a new direction by transferring religion from the realm of practical reason to the realm of pure reason. As Kent Richter, the translator of the English edition, explains, knowledge (*Wissen*), belief (*Glaube*), and aesthetic sense (*Ahndung*)³⁵ are three ways of taking something to be true (*Fürwahrhalten*); they are three distinct species of the epistemological genus "cognition" (*Erkenntnis*) and must be understood as three coequal types of conviction.³⁶ Knowledge is related to the natural world of phenomena through intuition (*Anschauung*) and is the realm of the natural

in the *Abhandlungen der Fries'schen Schule* NF 1, no. 2 (1904/1906). Nelson is responsible for introducing Fries to Bousset and Rudolf Otto, as well as for inaugurating the new series of the *Abhandlungen der Fries'schen Schule* (1904–1937).

³³ A new, centennial edition of this work was prepared by Nelson. See Jakob Friedrich Fries, *Wissen, Glaube und Ahndung*, ed. Leonard Nelson. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1905.

³⁴ Otto's debt to Fries, particularly to Fries's concept of *Ahndung*, is well-documented. For a positive evaluation of this relationship, see Philip C. Almond, "Rudolf Otto and the Kantian Tradition." *NZStH* 25 (1983): 52–67; for a critical appraisal see David Bastow, "Otto and Numinous Experience." *RelSt* 12 (1976): 159–176. For Otto's own perspective on Fries (and Kant), see Otto, *Kantisch-Fries'sche Religionsphilosophie und ihre Anwendung auf die Theologie. Zur Einleitung in die Glaubenslehre für Studenten der Theologie*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1909. English translation: *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, trans. E. B. Dicker. London: Williams & Northgate, 1931.

³⁵ The term *Ahndung* presents significant difficulties for the translator. In many translations of Otto's work, for example, the term is simply left in the original German. Possible English translations include "prescience," "presentiment," "inkling," and "intuitive awareness," but according to Richter each choice fails to capture the essence of what Fries (and Otto) mean by *Ahndung* or creates unnecessary confusion when used within the Kantian conceptual framework. *Ahndung*, as an equally valid and rigorous epistemic conviction, is much more than a vague "inkling" but also does not indicate any temporal priority to *Wissen* or *Glauben*, which eliminates terms such as "prescience" or "presentiment." "Intuitive awareness" introduces unnecessary confusion because of the practice of using "intuition" to translate *Anschauung* in the Kantian corpus. Richter chooses "aesthetic sense" to translate *Ahndung* for at least two reasons. First, "sense" has the benefit of ambiguity or complexity in English – one can have a "sense" of something in a number of ways – and, second, the modifier "aesthetic" nicely captures Fries's emphasis on the relationship between feeling (*Gefühl*) and judgments of the beautiful and the sublime. Kent Richter, translator's introduction to *Knowledge, Belief, and Aesthetic Sense*, by Jakob Friedrich Fries, ed. Frederick Gregory and trans. Kent Richter, *Geschichte der Wissenschaftsphilosophie*. Cologne: Dinter, Verlag der Philosophie, 1989, 9–10.

³⁶ Richter, translator's introduction to *Knowledge, Belief, and Aesthetic Sense*, 11.

sciences, belief is related to the eternal ideas through concepts of reason and is the realm of metaphysics, and aesthetic sense is related to the eternal in the finite world of nature through pure feeling and is the realm of religion.³⁷ Or as Fries puts it:

We have absolutely no immediate positive representation of the eternal, but through the union of knowledge and belief within the same consciousness there arises the conviction that the finite is only an appearance of the eternal. From this conviction arises the feeling of the recognition of the eternal within the finite, [a feeling] we call aesthetic sense.³⁸

The aesthetic sense for the eternal in the finite world of nature is what constitutes religiosity, which is expressed in the spirit of devotion.³⁹

The impact of Fries's definition of religiosity as the aesthetic sense for the eternal in the finite world of nature on Bousset's development as a theologian was profound. While Bousset did show some signs of a growing reluctance to entrust faith's security to any historical basis in *Jesus* and *Was Wissen Wir von Jesus?* he lacked the philosophical framework for justifying a full-scale flight from history. But in Fries's relocation of religion to the realm of aesthetics Bousset found just such a philosophical justification. In the first expression of his newfound Friesianism, Bousset reacts to the controversies sparked by the publication of Arthur Drews's *Die Christusmythe* (1909)⁴⁰ by confessing that the only way forward for Christian theology is to abandon its search for a firm foundation in history: "Systematic theologians can liberate us from this difficult situation only if they are able to lead us beyond it onto a storm-free area that must lie beyond everything historical."⁴¹

As many have noted, Drews's shot across the bow of contemporary German theology was significant, not so much for its constructive proposals or conclusions, but because it forced an honest and frank examination and discussion of the basic presuppositions operative in the theology of the day.⁴² Bousset responded by joining the chorus of theologians and philosophers of religion calling for a quest for a religious a priori independent of the vagaries of historical research.⁴³ He believed to have found a viable approach in Fries's philosophy of religion, particularly in the aesthetic sense in which the

³⁷ Fries, *Knowledge, Belief, and Aesthetic Sense*, 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 121–122.

⁴⁰ Arthur Drews, *Die Christusmythe*, 4th ed. Jena: E. Diederichs, 1910. English translation: *The Christ Myth*, trans. C. Delisle Burns, Westminster College – Oxford Classics in the Study of Religion. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998.

⁴¹ Wilhelm Bousset, "Kantisch-Friessche Religionsphilosophie und ihre Anwendung auf die Theologie." *ThR* 12 (1909): 419–436, 471–488, p. 429.

⁴² See, for example, B. A. Gerrish, "Jesus, Myth, and History: Troeltsch's Stand in the 'Christ-Myth' Debate." *JR* 55 (1975): 13–35.

⁴³ For a helpful summary of the various attempts to establish the religious a priori in this period, see Mark D. Chapman, "Struggles over Epistemology: The Religious A Priori." In *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology. Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany*, by Mark D. Chapman, Christian Theology in Context, 111–137. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

eternal ideas come vividly to life in and through feeling and which sees in the finite world of nature and history the "refracted rays of the eternal."⁴⁴

Three texts of Bousset's published between 1910 and 1912 reveal the radical reorientation of his thinking on history due to the influence of Fries, particularly in terms of the possibility of securing a firm foundation for faith in the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The first text is an essay on religious liberalism Bousset contributed to a volume edited by his colleague, Leonard Nelson, entitled *Was Ist Liberal?*⁴⁵ in which Bousset presents a frank evaluation of modern religious liberalism, noting both its strengths and its weaknesses.⁴⁶ The great strength of liberalism is the breadth of its historical view and the depth of its psychological observations; however, this strength is also its greatest weakness, as religious liberalism is in constant danger of losing its way in the "labyrinth" of historicism and psychologism.⁴⁷ This danger is felt most acutely by the mass of laypersons who prefer "grand, simple truths" to detailed historical and psychological accounts of how everything came to be; they want, Bousset suggests, to be "inspired and gripped in their innermost selves," but modern liberalism has failed to provide that inspiration.⁴⁸

The watchword of the day, "revelation in history," expresses the ambiguous character of modern liberalism, which had done much to liberate contemporary Christianity from uncritical bondage to authority and dogma only to return it to bondage to the capricious judgments of professional historians of religion. Historians claimed to have established once and for all the real foundation of the religious life in history, yet the results of their research provided little more than conflicting accounts and ideologically motivated interpretations. This is not to suggest that history has no role in academic theology, however. Bousset insists that history deserves a place of honor and dignity precisely because of its liberating power. But when history is granted exclusive leadership it quickly and inevitably results in conservatism or in the "quagmire of skepticism."⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Bousset, "Kantisch-Friessche Religionsphilosophie," 482.

⁴⁵ Wilhelm Bousset, "Der religiöse Liberalismus." In *Was Ist Liberal?* ed. Leonard Nelson, 21–40. Munich: Buchhandlung Nationalverein, 1910.

⁴⁶ Despite the tendency of many reviewers of Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* simply to label him a classic liberal, Bousset's own identification within the history of modern theology is more complex, especially after his introduction to the work of Fries. According to Klaus Berger, "His liberalism (political as well as theological) was ultimately an anthropologically matured rationalism with all of the positive pedagogical ideals of the Enlightenment, enriched by factors such as symbol, feeling, community, and the independence of the religious disposition in human beings." Klaus Berger, "Nationalsoziale Religionsgeschichte: Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920)." In *Profile des neuzeitlichen Protestantismus*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, vol. 2, pt. 2: *Kaiserreich*, 279–294. Gütersloh: Mohn, 1993, 290–291.

⁴⁷ Bousset, "Der religiöse Liberalismus," 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

The way beyond this crisis must lie elsewhere, and Bousset claims to have discovered this way forward in a return to the principles of the Enlightenment with its respect for the power of reason and its suspicion of the power of history to demonstrate eternal truths. Both Lessing and Kant understood this and expressed the primacy of reason over history in famous aphorisms: "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof for necessary truths of reason" (Lessing)⁵⁰ and "the historical serves only for illustration, not for demonstration" (Kant).⁵¹ But while the great figures of the Enlightenment recognized the power of reason, they were less able to recognize the power of symbols to convey eternal truths. The old rationalists prized "naked ideas" – of God, freedom, immortality, etc. – above all else, but Bousset suggests that this preference for naked ideas and the attempts to provide logical proofs of them threatened to obscure the "higher spiritual life" that lies in the depths of human nature and is given primordially with it.⁵²

It is this desire to maintain the value of the symbolic in religion that Bousset believes sets the "new" rationalism he advocates apart from the old rationalism of the Enlightenment. Where the old rationalists desired the elimination of anything symbolic, poetic, or fantastical from the religious life in order to allow the pure ideas to stand on their own, Bousset desires a concept of religion that prizes the dynamic interdependence of idea and symbol: "Without ideas, religion would be a free-for-all of enthusiasm and fantasy; without the clothes and coverings of symbols, it would be a shadow without flesh and blood."⁵³

The dynamic relationship between idea and symbol lies at the heart of Bousset's concept of religion and represents his decisive break with historicism. Religion is not externally given to human beings as something alien to human nature; rather, religion is intrinsic to human nature and is constituent of human being. Without religion human nature could not exist at all. The eternal ideas, clothed in symbols, serve to illumine the depths of human being and to create the specific, concrete forms of religious devotion. Revelation in history, therefore, is not an external event but an unfolding (*Entfaltung*) of what is present in human nature from the very beginning, a "becoming manifest to our consciousness of a primordial disposition given with our human nature."⁵⁴ There can be no ultimate historical foundation for religion precisely because history only unfolds what is already present a priori in human nature. The eternal ideas alone provide the ultimate foundation for religion

⁵⁰ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power." In *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 85.

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, *Lose Blätter aus Kants Nachlaß*, ed. Rudolf Reicke, 3 vols. Königsberg: F. Beyer, 1889–1898, 3:66.

⁵² Bousset, "Der religiöse Liberalismus," 32.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

and, clothed in symbols, they serve to illumine historical existence: the historical serves only for illustration, not for demonstration.

With this reorientation of religion away from history toward ideas and symbols, Bousset does not claim to have established an absolute claim to truth and understanding. In fact, just such a claim is what doomed orthodoxy and historicism, both of which made inappropriate claims to absolutism. Bousset's new rationalism recognizes the provisional character of symbols and their insufficiency adequately and exhaustively to express universal truth, a recognition that requires a certain level of humility on the part of the theologian:

Religious liberalism also knows that coverings and symbols are just coverings and symbols that are never entirely adequate for ultimate truths but are always only a stammering and prattling, a speaking in parables and images, and that only a most feasible approximation of the image to the truth can ever be sought.⁵⁵

Perhaps the most significant text for understanding Bousset's flight from history and its effect on his appraisal of the problem of faith and history with respect to the historical Jesus is a lecture delivered at the Fifth International Congress of Free Christianity and Religious Progress in Berlin in 1910.⁵⁶ Speaking on the significance of the person of Jesus for faith, Bousset brings the influence of Carlyle and Fries to bear on the question of the historical Jesus. The New Testament scholar of the 1900s is virtually unrecognizable in this lecture, as Bousset begins by confessing that "what we know of the pragmatic context of [the life of Jesus] is so little that it would fit on a slip of paper."⁵⁷ Furthermore, what little we do have is so thoroughly overshadowed by the dogmatic interests of the early community that any hope of presenting an accurate, comprehensive portrait of the historical Jesus must be given up as doomed to failure. Nevertheless, the prevailing trend in liberal Protestantism is to pretend to have sufficient historical data to reconstruct the life of the historical Jesus as a secure foundation for faith. These attempts inevitably fail because of the limitations of the data and because of the faulty method used to establish that foundation. In a sure indication of his radical reorientation, Bousset declares that "history resolutely pursued to its end necessarily points beyond itself."⁵⁸ Another foundation for faith must be established, and that foundation is to be found in reason.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁶ Wilhelm Bousset, "Die Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben: Historische und rationale Grundlagen des Glaubens." In *Fünfter Weltkongress für Freies Christentum und Religiösen Fortschritt. Protokoll der Verhandlungen*, ed. Max Fischer and Friedrich Michael Schiele, 291–305. Berlin-Schöneberg: Protestantischer Schriftenvertrieb, 1910. English translation: "The Significance of the Personality of Jesus for Belief." In *Fifth International Congress of Free Christianity and Religious Progress. Proceedings and Papers*, ed. Charles W. Wendte and V. D. Davis, 208–221. Berlin-Schöneberg: Protestantischer Schriftenvertrieb, 1911. Citations are to the German original.

⁵⁷ Bousset, "Die Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben," 292.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 294.

Fries and Carlyle provide Bousset with the necessary underpinnings for this reorientation of religion away from history toward reason. Fries's concept of *Abndung*, the feeling for the eternal within the finite world of nature and history, combined with Carlyle's philosophy of clothes and his description of the great figures of history as symbols through which the eternal is manifest in history provide the secure foundation for faith that historicism and the old rationalism failed to provide:

Practical belief does not live immediately on those ideas which reflection possesses only after painstaking efforts; neither does it live on proof based on understanding; it lives on images and symbols and in the feeling for parable and image. Naked ideas are incomprehensible, ungraspable schemes; they need wrapping and symbolization. The world of eternity can only become graspable and objective when it shimmers transparently through this world of finite things: the eternal in the finite. The words of the poet contain the profoundest truth: "All that is past is only a parable."⁵⁹

Herein lies the value of the great religious personalities for Bousset, particularly Jesus of Nazareth: they not only create the profound and enduring religious symbols that manifest the eternal within history and illumine the depths of human nature; they *become* those symbols for the believing community. But there is a constant danger of misunderstanding the symbolic character of the great religious personalities in at least three ways: by attempting logical demonstration of their truth, as the old rationalists did; by attempting to transform the symbol into dogma, as the orthodox theologians do; or by attempting to establish the historical veracity of their lives, words and deeds, as the historicists do. Each of these attempts is doomed to failure because each fails to value the symbol *qua* symbol and expects it to function on another level or for another purpose than it was intended.

Every attempt to provide historical verification of the gospel narratives misses the point of the symbol of Jesus. Historical verification can never demonstrate the eternal truth and value of Jesus precisely because his value is symbolic and *not* historical. The symbol only illustrates, it never demonstrates the eternal ideas. As soon as demonstration is sought, "everything turns upside down and melts away in our hands."⁶⁰ There is a profoundly liberating power in this view of Jesus, especially in light of the controversy rippling through German theology after the publication of Drews's *Die Christusmythe*. Christians need no longer fear even the most radical denial of the historical existence of Jesus because historical existence has only a provisional, not ultimate value for faith. The ultimate value for the faith is the symbolic character of the image of Jesus, the immediate significance of the symbol for believing and acting as a Christian in the modern world. History cannot provide that significance, nor can it take it away, because the significance of the symbol lies in the eternal value of ideas that are illustrated by the

⁵⁹ The words are taken from the last chorus of Goethe's *Faust*. Bousset, "Die Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben," 301–302.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

symbol and are related to reason and faith, not to historical understanding. Christians may venerate Jesus as the creative genius who has become the “enduring and most powerfully effective symbol”⁶¹ of the Christian faith, despite the unreliability of historical judgments about his life.

Bousset's summary of his remarks deserves a lengthy quotation, as it presents clearly and concisely the influence of Carlyle and Fries on his new approach to the question of the significance of the historical Jesus for faith:

The question of the existence or historical perceptibility [of Jesus] no longer plays a dominant role, for first of all we no longer need anxiously to delineate what in the image of Jesus is the addition and creation of the community from what is reality in the narrower historical sense. We need no longer fear the possible results of historical research, that this reality in a narrower sense remains irretrievably lost or unknowable on several points. At this point everything depends on the symbol and the image itself, not on ultimate truth and reality. This lies behind the symbols in the immovable, God-given depths of human reason and in the eternal values of ideas. The symbol serves for illustration, not for demonstration. Therefore we also make the curious observation that the image of Jesus as his immediate community presented it in the gospels remains and will remain more effective as poetry and truth than as any historical attempt at reconstruction, precise as it might be. This faith does not inquire into historical reality in a narrower sense, but rather into the religious and the morally practical; it stops, consciously or unconsciously, at the image. [...] And if science were to pronounce the most extreme verdict, that Jesus never existed, faith cannot be lost, because it rests on its own internal foundations. Moreover, the image of Jesus in the gospels would nevertheless remain, and even if only as great poetry, still as poetry of eternal symbolic significance.⁶²

The Berlin lecture of 1910 reveals just how much Bousset's perspective on the historical Jesus had changed as a result of his introduction to Fries. But it is in a lecture delivered two years later at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands that Bousset presents a more comprehensive account of his theological and philosophical perspective on the problem of religion and history.⁶³

Sketching the history of theology in the nineteenth century, the “century of history,” Bousset credits the radical historicization of virtually every academic discipline, including theology, with some of the greatest successes and failures of that century and notes that the situation of contemporary German theology is only to be understood in terms of its inheritance of the previous century's historicizing efforts. The historicization of theology was accompanied by a nearly instinctive rejection of anything rational in religion, resulting in the distillation of all theology to one single point: the historical Jesus of Nazareth. This development was not without its critics, however. Bousset notes that several theologians did (rightly) fear that such a restrictive interest in historical foundations would throw faith into an untenable dependence on

⁶¹ Ibid., 305.

⁶² Ibid., 304–305.

⁶³ Wilhelm Bousset, *Religion und Geschichte*, Bijlage tot het Jaarboek der Rijks-Universiteit te Groningen 1911/1912, no. 3. Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1912.

the uncertainty and relativity of historical events and figures and on the fluctuating results of historical research.⁶⁴

Sensing the danger of entrusting faith to the judgments of professional historians, some theologians devised a method for removing the significance of Jesus from the shifting results of historical research while still insisting on maintaining a foundation for faith in history. The most sophisticated of these attempts was made by the systematic theologian, Georg Wobbermin, in a 1911 essay entitled *Geschichte und Historie in der Religionswissenschaft*.⁶⁵ By distinguishing between *Historie* as the subject and results of scientific historical research and *Geschichte* as the realm of meaning, value and significance prior and superior to any historical investigation, Wobbermin hoped to have secured a historic foundation for Christian faith that is nevertheless independent of the relative and provisional results of historical research. Bousset, however, is not convinced that this method offers a viable way beyond the current impasse, remarking that it is “only an illusion, a deception” with the ultimate goal of “protecting the person of Jesus and his unique place and dignity, the totality of his nature as distinct from all human nature, on this detour through history.”⁶⁶

More damaging to the prospects of contemporary theology than the controversies surrounding the historical Jesus is the great unasked question concerning the relationship between history and reason. Until this more basic question is asked and answered, Bousset believes that theology will be inextricably tangled in the web of historical relativity and uncertainty with no hope of release. The problem, as Bousset understands it, is not primarily one of how history must be understood, but rather how the relationship between history and reason is to be understood: is history superior to reason, or is reason superior to history? If history is superior to reason, then the current controversies are unavoidable and faith either must make its peace with history as its only possible foundation or consider the possibility that all hope is indeed lost. If, however, reason is shown to be superior to history, then the

⁶⁴ Perhaps the most famous example of such a warning is Martin Kähler's collection of essays, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*, 2nd ed. Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1896. English translation: *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten, Fortress Texts in Modern Theology. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964.

⁶⁵ Georg Wobbermin, *Geschichte und Historie in der Religionswissenschaft. Über die Notwendigkeit, in der Religionswissenschaft zwischen Geschichte und Historie strenger zu unterscheiden, als gewöhnlich geschieht*, 2. Ergänzungsheft zur Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1911. For more on Wobbermin's method of distinguishing between *Geschichte* and *Historie* and on Wobbermin's critique of Bousset's Berlin lecture on the basis of this method, see Brent A. R. Hege, “Geschichte und Historie: The Problem of Faith and History.” In *Faith at the Intersection of History and Experience. The Theology of Georg Wobbermin*, by Brent A. R. Hege, 15–77. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009.

⁶⁶ Bousset, *Religion und Geschichte*, 5.

controversy is avoidable and a new foundation can be sought that lies beyond history.

The definition of reason here must not be limited to an intellectualistic concept, which was the error of the older rationalists. Rather, Bousset proposes that reason must be defined as "the total range of basic facts of the human spiritual life": the intellect (expressed in philosophy and the natural sciences), the will (expressed in morality), and feeling (expressed in art and religion).⁶⁷ The human being is thus understood as a unified whole constituted by this "total range of basic facts," beyond whose limits and conditions it is impossible to progress. Were the human being to be understood as a creature of unlimited potential for progress and evolution, history would then be understood as the locus of creativity and novelty and history would be superior to reason. But the human being is not capable of unlimited progress and evolution; the basic forms and facts of human life are intrinsic to its created nature and function to limit progress. History, then, is not the locus of creativity and novelty but the process of the unfolding and coming to consciousness of what is primordially present and given a priori in human nature. Thus reason is superior to history as its criterion and norm, and the history of human experience serves as a "lamp shining into the depths of human being,"⁶⁸ illuminating the ultimate truths and foundations of human life.

The solution to the problem of history and reason, particularly in terms of the questions of primacy and superiority, has important consequences for the definition of religion. If history claims superiority over reason, religion must be something alien to human nature and reason must be subordinated to the unpredictable novelty of history. Bousset, however, suggests that religion is something given primordially in human nature and essential to it. History does not create religion; history merely unfolds what is already given in human nature and brings it to greater clarity before the judgment seat of reason. Therefore reason is superior to history but is not *independent* of history. Reason requires history to unfold and illustrate the eternal ideas and ultimate truths that are hidden in the depths of human nature. Without the illustrative power of history and its "coverings, images and symbols,"⁶⁹ the ideas would remain vague abstractions and religion would lack vitality and strength.

Religion cannot simply dispense with the historically factual once the superiority of reason has been established. Reason will produce greater clarity and transparency with respect to the world of eternal ideas, but the symbols and "clothes" of history remain necessary as the means by which those eternal ideas become available to reason.⁷⁰ Or as Bousset puts it, "It is impor-

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁰ Recall that Fries defined the aesthetic sense – whose proper sphere is religion – as the form of cognition that grasps the eternal in and through the finite world of nature and history.

tant to note that we only *approach* ultimate truth. It is never given to us to affirm ultimate religious truth in a form free from all historical factuality and thus in its full vitality.”⁷¹ Thus the poetic symbol of Jesus Christ remains potent for faith regardless of the results of historical research into his life, precisely because of its poetic and symbolic power. This symbol is a “living, continually effective presence” that is the product of the “freely and strongly flowing stream of the present pious life.”⁷²

With this defense of reason’s superiority to history Bousset has made his decisive break with history as the foundation of faith. The significance of this break was not lost on Bousset’s contemporaries, most notably Ernst Troeltsch, who expressed his misgivings about Bousset’s rationalism already in 1909:

I remain under the influence of history and psychology, and I cannot leave historicism because I cannot find the heart for a definitive, substantial rationalism. In other words, I cannot really and decisively accept it as a fact. [...] Yours is a rationalism that regards the historical as more or less accidental convergences and examples of being-in-itself and as something effective. Naturally this is a position that is independent of history and in that respect it is quite seductive. However, with it the Christian character of religion is also lost.⁷³

That Troeltsch refused to follow Bousset into a “definitive, substantial rationalism” is not surprising given Troeltsch’s penchant for historicism, but despite Troeltsch’s perception of the distance between himself and Bousset, Troeltsch’s 1911 essay on the significance of the historical existence of Jesus expresses many of the same themes Bousset presented in his Berlin lecture of 1910, particularly in terms of the cultic significance of the symbol of Jesus Christ.⁷⁴ In spite of obvious basic disagreements, the similarities between the two positions are not lost on interpreters, many of whom treat Troeltsch’s

Bousset’s definition here of the relationship between reason and history clearly reflects the influence of Fries.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 41. Bousset also gives a colorful description here of the sources of this “present pious life”: “We receive and have our religion from our mothers who pray with us, from the general atmosphere of reverence and piety in which we grew up in our parents’ house. We obtain it in the community with its pious personalities, in which the electric spark jumps in the contact of soul with soul, and not in the first instance from the contemplation of an image of Christ placed before us, no matter how noble it might be. ... If that [present pious life] is absent, no amount of history will do any good.” Ibid.

⁷³ Ernst Troeltsch, letter to Wilhelm Bousset (December 14th, 1909), quoted in Karsten Lehmkuhler, “Die Bedeutung des Kultus für das Christentum der Moderne: Eine Diskussion zwischen Wilhelm Bousset und Ernst Troeltsch.” In *Die “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule.” Facetten eines theologischen Umbruchs*, ed. Gerd Lüdemann. Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 1996, 222.

⁷⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1911. English translation: “The Significance of the Historical Existence of Jesus for Faith.” In *Writings on Theology and Religion*, trans. and ed. Robert Morgan and Michael Pye, 182–207. Atlanta: John Knox, 1977.

and Bousset's positions together.⁷⁵ Albert Schweitzer devotes considerable attention to the positions of Bousset and Troeltsch, reserving a faint measure of praise for their contributions in the midst of harsh criticism. Ultimately, however, Schweitzer believes that Bousset falls short of Troeltsch precisely because of his flight from history toward reason and symbol:

A Jesus who is ultimately a more or less real symbol can be irrelevant to faith. A symbol adds nothing to the life and content of a religion. Quite the opposite. It inhibits its energy and incurs a price which, as history has taught us, in the long run has the greatest destructive effect on the spiritual property of that faith.

Is the historical Jesus [...] a personality with meaning for us? Has he power to influence and enrich our religion? Yes or no? If yes, this personality has no need to be adorned with the aesthetic garb of a symbol; if no, it has been wrapped in a shroud.⁷⁶

Clearly those who insist on securing the foundation of Christian faith in the historical Jesus will remain unconvinced by Bousset's solution to the problem of faith and history. The explicit influence of Fries did not extend far beyond the original circle of the Neo-Friesian school founded by Leonard Nelson, with the exception of the enormous impact of Rudolf Otto's Fries-inspired work, *Das Heilige*.⁷⁷ But Fries's implicit and often unrecognized influence extended well into the twentieth century thanks to Bousset's magnum opus, *Kyrios Christos*.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of *Kyrios Christos* on New Testament scholarship in the twentieth century. In the forward to the fifth edition, Rudolf Bultmann recalls that "among the works of New Testament scholarship the study of which I used to recommend in my lectures to students as indispensable, above all belonged Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*."⁷⁸ Another noted New Testament scholar, Norman Perrin, observes that "there are some books which stand out as creative milestones of modern research, books shattering in their immediate impact and seminal in their long-term impact. One such book in New Testament studies is certainly Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* which would force its way onto anyone's 'ten most important' list."⁷⁹

Despite nearly universal acclaim for the significance of *Kyrios Christos* for New Testament studies, most commentators fail to appreciate its theolog-

⁷⁵ See, for example, Lehmkuhler, "Die Bedeutung des Kultus" and Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1st complete ed., trans. W. Montgomery et al. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.

⁷⁶ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (2001), 409–410.

⁷⁷ Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, 31st–35th ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1963. English translation: *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey, Galaxy Book 14. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

⁷⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, introductory word to the fifth edition of *Kyrios Christos*, by Wilhelm Bousset, 7. Citations are to the English edition.

⁷⁹ Norman Perrin, "Reflections on the Publication in English of Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*." *ET* 82 (1971): 340–342, p. 340.

ical context, dismissing this aspect of the book as a typical example of late Wilhelmine liberalism.⁸⁰ What is missing in these judgments is an acknowledgment of the vast differences between the Bousset of *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum* or *Jesus*, who can more rightly be labeled a classic liberal, and the Bousset of *Kyrios Christos*, who had experienced a radical reorientation of thought thanks to the influence of Carlyle and Fries. By the writing of *Kyrios Christos* Bousset had abandoned virtually all hope of reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus, seeking instead the historical roots of Christian faith in the communities that created or borrowed messianic or divine titles that they then applied to Jesus of Nazareth, culminating in the cultic hero, *Kyrios Christos*.⁸¹

Such an approach to the development of early Christology is only properly understood in light of Bousset's earlier work on the relationship between faith, history and reason. Bousset's belief in the power of history to illustrate eternal truths to reason by means of symbols explains the emphasis on the cultic community and its creation of the symbols of faith, as well as the lack of attention to the historical Jesus himself. But such an emphasis remains a mystery when one simply dismisses Bousset as a classic liberal only interested in uncovering the essential historical facts of the life of Jesus. *Kyrios Christos* could have been written only after Bousset's engagement with Carlyle and Fries, whose impact provides the interpretive key to this study of the Christology of the early church. Everything hangs here on the power of symbol: "The purely historical actually is never able to have an effect, but only the vitally contemporary symbol in which one's own religious conviction clarified is present." With respect to the early church's creation of the symbol of the Lord Christ, "such an age needed this very picture of Jesus as the first disciples of Jesus created it, and accepted the Eternal in it in the colorful wrappings of temporal clothing."⁸²

Here we see the practical application of Bousset's theoretical reflections on the relationship between history and reason, between symbol and eternal ideas. And although some will no doubt balk at Bousset's proposal to leave

⁸⁰ See, for example, Hurtado, "New Testament Christology," 307, Boers, "Jesus and the Christian Faith," 452, Perrin, "Reflections," 342, and Howard Clark Kee, "Christology and Ecclesiology: Titles of Christ and Models of Community." *Semeia* 30 (1984): 171–192, p. 176.

⁸¹ "Kyrios Christos is Jesus of Nazareth in essence as the Lord of his community, venerated in the cultus. The present work in general attempts to take its point of departure from the practice of the cultus and of the community's worship and to understand the way things developed from this perspective." Wilhelm Bousset, foreword to the first edition of *Kyrios Christos*, 11. The similarities between this summary of the perspective of *Kyrios Christos* and Bousset's contention in his Berlin lecture of 1910 that there can be no stark divisions between the historical Jesus and the expressions of the early Christian community's faith are striking: "[W]e no longer need anxiously to delineate what in the image of Jesus is the addition and creation of the community from what is reality in the narrower historical sense." Bousset, "Die Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben," 305.

⁸² Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 117–118.

the historical Jesus in the past, others will find refuge in a faith that no longer clings to a shaky foundation. As Walter Weaver observes:

Others might be content with the story itself, with symbol and myth, similar to Bousset's symbolic Jesus. There is much to be said for that. Religious groups create discourse communities within which they speak knowingly to one another a shared language that informs their communal existence. It is not often asked, within those communities, whether the discourse refers back to something provable in history. [S]ome might find it plausible and possible to live with a meaningful story, knowing that most humans do so anyway on a daily basis. That does not preclude wishing to know as much as can be known about the source of the story, but at least it delivers the conscience from a troubled anxiety over the rootage of the story in demonstrable history.⁸³

While Bousset's contributions to the history of New Testament scholarship have received the attention due them, the full impact of his contributions to the faith-history debate in the early twentieth century remains relatively unacknowledged and unappreciated.⁸⁴ The specifically theological character of Bousset's work on Jesus has been particularly neglected, a fact all the more lamentable because it is precisely Bousset's *theological* development that provides the key to understanding his achievements and enduring significance as a New Testament scholar. It is to be hoped that Bousset's contribution to the faith-history debate, particularly in terms of the significance of Jesus for

⁸³ Walter Weaver, *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century. 1900–1950*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999, 365–366.

⁸⁴ A flurry of reviews and reappraisals of Bousset's impact as a New Testament scholar accompanied the publication of the English translation of *Kyrios Christos* in 1970. The vast majority of these reviews note Bousset's significant contributions to the study of the New Testament in the twentieth century but quickly move to dismiss – rightly, in some cases – his conclusions as having been superseded by more recent developments in the field (particularly due to the discovery in 1947 of the Qumran library). See, for example, Kee, "Christology and Ecclesiology," 171. For a sympathetic review that pays special attention to the specifically Christological themes of *Kyrios Christos* and their continuation in the work of later generations of New Testament scholars, see Frederick H. Borsch, "Forward and Backward from Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*," *Religion* 3 (1973): 66–73. For a less sympathetic review, see Boers, "Jesus and the Christian Faith." Boers devotes a considerable part of his review to the question of the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, a question that dominated Christology for generations and is the subject of a recent book by Dale C. Allison, Jr., entitled *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009. Boers (wrongly, in my opinion) argues that the Christological dilemma introduced by *Kyrios Christos* – that the Christology expressed in the New Testament was not historically true of Jesus of Nazareth, thus undercutting the most basic assumptions of New Testament Christology – was not a dilemma that Bousset himself faced because he did not identify with the Christology of the New Testament. Rather, Boers argues that Bousset, as a nineteenth-century liberal, identified with the "simple teaching of Jesus, of which the NT Christology was a mere burdening and complication." Boers, "Jesus and the Christian Faith," 452. This present study of Bousset's contribution to the faith-history debate, particularly with respect to the historical Jesus, hopefully has shown that Bousset's view of the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is far more complex and nuanced than his reviewers have acknowledged and that hasty dismissals of Bousset's positions as "classically liberal" threaten to obscure what were in many cases novel and compelling insights into the problem of faith and history.

faith, will generate renewed interest in this important figure and help to shed some light into a neglected area of modern theology.

Abstract

Wilhelm Bousset, a leading member of the religionsgeschichtliche school and author of a seminal work on early Christology, *Kyrios Christos*, is typically regarded by reviewers of his work as a classic nineteenth-century liberal who sought a secure foundation for faith in the historical Jesus. However, this view of Bousset fails to appreciate the significant development of his theological perspective on the relationship between faith and history, a perspective that underwent a profound shift due to the influence of the English historian Thomas Carlyle and the Kantian philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries. It is the influence of these two figures that enables Bousset to justify a full-scale flight from history and to seek faith's foundation elsewhere, in the poetic symbol of Jesus Christ. The resulting solution to the problem of faith and history represents a unique and compelling alternative to the solutions of the leading theologians and New Testament scholars of the early twentieth century.



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